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ABSTRACT

Use of time was investigated in program evaluations conducted by a school system's department of research and evaluation. All evaluation designs developed in the department's bureaus for the 1983-84 school year were examined, and key staff coordinating each evaluation bureau were interviewed. How time was scheduled in each design, and then how time was used in carrying out evaluations were examined. Findings identified key variables that, in early stages of evaluation, may contribute to subsequent non-utilization of evaluation information. Timeliness as a prerequisite factor was established as a necessary but not sufficient condition for utilization of evaluation information. It also appeared that the research and evaluation department's goals were ambiguous and that staff roles were also unclear. (Author/GDC)

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INVESTIGATION INTO THE USE OF TIME IN PROGRAM EVALUATION AT A SCHOOL DISTRICT'S DEPARTMENT OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

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Use of time in program evaluations conducted by a school system's Department of Research and Evaluation was investigated. All evaluation designs developed in the Department's bureaus for the 1983-84 school year were examined and key staff coordinating each evaluation bureau were interviewed. How time was scheduled in each design, and then how time was used in carrying out of evaluations were the two major questions for this study. Findings identify key variables that in early stages of evaluation may contribute to subsequent non-utilization of evaluation information. Timeliness as a prerequisite factor was established as a necessary but not sufficient condition for utilization of evaluation information. A major policy issue concerning the nature of evaluation and research in a large school district is then discussed.

Introduction

Timeliness as a prerequisite factor in evaluation information use is frequently found in the literature on evaluation utilization (Stufflebeam, 1969; Patton, 1982; Rossi & Freeman, 1982; Talmage, 1982). Weiss (1972) has argued that "Whatever the reasons, organizations cannot use results responsibly when they appear late" (p.119). David (1978) found that "timing of an evaluation can by itself restrict potential utility by not meshing with the timing of program planning" (p.38). Evidence from project directors as well, found late reports "not useful" (Dickey, 1980, p. 73).

More positively, other evaluators have reported that when decision makers receive evaluation information in sufficient time for decision-making events, and are not forced to wait for the final report, findings are used (Brown & Braskamp, 1980; Cichon, Callahan & Singh, 1981; Leviton & Hughes, 1981; Mitroff, 1982). Hence, evaluation utilization factors include timeliness as a necessary but not sufficient requirement for utilization of evaluation findings.

Why reports in particular and information in general were late was investigated by Chelimsky (1977) who reported experimental designs and length of time to do the study right were key inhibitors of timely reports. In Research and Evaluation Departments where many program evaluations are conducted, often what becomes priority is fulfilling the terms of the funding proposal, not providing timely and accurate information to program implementers (King & Pechman, 1982). Furthermore, once reports are late, a "mind set" may develop in program managers, planners and decision-makers,

where they believe reports will continue to be late, thus, these actors conduct their business separate from the work of the program evaluators (Alkin and others, 1983).

This paper seeks to explore factors that affect timely reporting of evaluation information. A key policy issue that emanates from the findings is then discussed.

The setting for this investigation was a large, urban school district's Department of Research and Evaluation. In this investigation timeliness refers to evaluation reports being completed in accordance with funding schedules and within meaningful time-frames for program managers and decision makers.

Two major questions were asked:

How is time scheduled in the evaluation design?

How is time used as the evaluation is conducted?

To answer these major questions, five secondary questions formed the structure for gathering data for the investigation:

Is there a written design for the evaluation?

Is there a written schedule, shared with all principal participants?

Are evaluation tasks specified?

Are there bottlenecks? Breakdowns? What seems to cause them?

What are the key variables in timeliness of evaluation reports?

Methods and Procedures

Permission was granted by the Director of Research and Evaluation to examine each of the evaluation designs developed by the Department in the 1983-84 school year.

Two methods were used to carry out this study:

First, designs and/or action plans were analyzed to determine how time was scheduled or if a schedule or timeline that sequenced evaluation activities or events was built into the evaluation design. The investigator then derived a flow chart based on months of the year to clearly delineate what needed to be done, when, and by whom. Second, interviews were conducted with staff in each of the Bureaus within the Department to verify the derived flow chart and answer the second major question, how is time used as the evaluation is carried out.

The organizational structure of the Department of Research and Evaluation suggested the structure for presenting findings. A Department Director oversees nine Bureaus and the general administration of the Department. Within six Bureaus evaluations for various programs are conducted. Three of the nine Bureaus perform services to assist those conducting program evaluations and testing. In some instances funding sources are unique and in others there is overlap with programs having multiple funders. In general, staff are assigned to a particular Bureau however, an individual may have primary duties in a number of program evaluations and secondary duties in others. Table 1, shows a chart of Department Organization and Characteristics.

Findings

Data gathered from each Bureau and presented in Table 2 show in answer to the first question that time is unevenly scheduled, designs have varying formats, plans are unevenly developed and unevenly shared with evaluation and program staff. In no Bureau were tasks specified in component parts of who would do what, when, rather, general and major events were listed.

The second question, answered by interview data, how time is used in the Department, is also seen to be uneven. Table 3 displays a number of common "bottlenecks" mentioned by all Bureaus. Table 4 is an extension of Table 3 and presents positive statements from the data that document efficiency, and suggest recommendations for improved working conditions.

Bottlenecks: Sources of Time Delay

The effect of each delay on the Bureaus varies. Indeed, from the instrumentation for this study, the effect of each bottleneck cannot be easily or accurately measured. From Table 4 as well, the impact of incidents where time schedules were maintained is not precisely measurable. Nevertheless, from the data some common themes or variables emerge.

External influences:

Clearly the Department is affected by external influences. For example, it was stated when the school system shut down, as during a teachers' strike, Research and Evaluation as well as other Departments were affected. Recovering from external influence was stated by staff to include: exerting extra effort to recoup momentum, squeezing tasks into shorter time periods,

adjusting schedules, and deleting activities. However, some of the effects of external influences on the operation of the Department were said to be subtle. The comment, "you take one day at a time", reflects a feeling that long range planning, necessary in evaluation research, may be negatively influenced by external forces. Mentioned was a "malaise" that sets in when nothing happens as one plans.

Department emergencies:

Another bottleneck identified shows that Bureau staff perceive that Departmental emergencies keep them off their scheduled evaluation tasks. Every program evaluation Bureau (excluding Equal Opportunity) mentioned that coming to the aid of the Equal Opportunity evaluation delayed work in their own Bureau. Also, other emergencies or "work stoppages" occurred during the year and put staff off their schedules.

Some staff interviewed said they were annoyed and discouraged at being "pulled off" their project to work on the latest emergency. It was said that in spite of the effort to plan and schedule tasks, delays were inevitable as long as interruptions were the norm. During the interviews it was stated that program evaluation tasks diminish in importance as the Department responds to political emergencies.

Dissemination:

Evaluators said they felt the care they took with their work was pointless when final reports were disseminated only to the School Board, Superintendents, and/or the funding agency, but not to the field, to persons

implementing programs. One staff interviewed contended that the effect of non-dissemination in the long-term was debilitating to continued optimism about evaluation. Continually stated was the need by evaluators to communicate their findings, and those interviewed expressed being professionally gratified when able to present data at inservice meetings with program staff.

Internal review procedures:

Another bottleneck mentioned that seems to have an effect similar to non-dissemination was the "Internal Review Procedure". A number of those interviewed had evaluation reports routinely reviewed by a Review Committee and these staff expressed confusion over exactly what steps comprised the review, and what happens to reports once they were reviewed. Some staff believed reports were "stopped" at this level, never to be disseminated in written form to program administrators, managers, and teachers. Based on interviews with two Review Committee members, this was said to be inaccurate. The committee members stated that reports were not stopped at the committee level, but were only reviewed for technical and editorial quality before being sent back to the writer for revisions, and then sent on to the Department Director. This bottleneck, while contributing to a feeling of pointlessness and confusion, also suggests faulty communication within the Department. Requested were more formal, explicit procedures for the review of reports.

Department goals:

A key bottleneck that was said to contribute to diminished importance of evaluation tasks was the belief that the Department has ambiguous goals and direction. It was clear that those interviewed were calling for a reduction in ambiguity. A number of staff mentioned that the Department has "no mission", that any crisis can come along and alter planned tasks. When staff are asked to suddenly work on another evaluation that has little to do with their assigned work, the worth of what had been scheduled was diminished.

In an interview with the Department Director, this issue was probed. It was stated that the Department of Research and Evaluation was created in order to respond to the General Superintendent, the Board of Education, and other school system staff to answer key evaluation and research questions. Thus, from its inception the Department's role was to be responsive to various audiences, each of whom represented a constituency with a particular political view.

The data from this investigation substantiates the assumption that empirical research finds an uneasy place in political environments. Furthermore, in the interview with the Director, this issue was illuminated in the context of the environment under study. He stated that most Bureau staff had a different view of the Department's role than he did. His view was broad, seeing research needs, but also seeing beyond individual program evaluations into the perceptions of other school system administrators. On the other hand, some staff have a narrow view of their roles, seeing only their own specific evaluation tasks.

A second key point voiced in the interviews that concerned particular goals of the Department was the desire and need for those staff formally trained in research to conduct studies and communicate professionally with the research community. It was stated that invaluable data were gathered, but findings and interpretations were often narrow as they were structured to answer evaluation questions mandated by the funding agency. Some held that the data could provide answers to many other evaluation and research questions, yet there seemed to be little opportunity or encouragement to conduct professional research. Probing into why this seemed to be so uncovered two views. First, staff said permission was rarely granted to those who proposed their own studies, probably for political reasons. Second, the Department Director stated that only so much work could be done and he did not want people neglecting their department duties. Also, he stated, in a political environment, care was needed so that findings were not misinterpreted. While each of these sources voiced differing views, both cited the political environment as the cause of constraints on evaluation and research.

Bureau specific delays:

A cause of time delay mentioned in both Program and Service Bureaus was the condition of the data that come from the schools. Many data are incomplete and impossible to analyze. Working with program staff responsible for data collection to upgrade this dimension of evaluation was not routinely built into program or evaluation designs, nor was this a part of most evaluator's job role.

Other sources of time delay seen in Table 3, show Bilingual Evaluation believes it is understaffed, and Equal Opportunity endured a massive program expansion. The Service Bureaus have a common source of bottleneck, as they are each dependent upon the timeliness of Program Evaluation Bureaus. When Program Evaluations are late, Scanner, Technical Service, and Production get "squeezed."

In summary, common themes emerge from the data that point to sources of time delay. In the next section of this report, positive features, as well as recommendations offered by staff in the interview, are presented.

Positive Features that Enhance Timeliness

Table 4 presents data from the interviews in which staff mentioned a number of ways time delays were avoided.

Training and expertise:

It is evident that experience in evaluation goes far to avoid time delay. In a number of Bureaus, staff are professionally trained in research, evaluation and quantitative methodology. In some Bureaus, staff have been trained "on the job" and in these instances, an uneveness of skill was evident. Where skill in evaluation exists, staff seem to know what to do to avoid late written reports, or at least late verbal reports of findings to program managers.

Experience and exposure:

Age of a Bureau appears to be a factor in timeliness. The oldest Bureau, formerly the Department of Citywide Testing, appears efficiently operated and seems to avoid getting "bogged down" in the way Program Evaluation Bureaus do. A few factors characterize this Bureau. First, as an experienced Department, it has standard operating procedures in place. Second, it does not conduct program evaluations, but rather reports results of testing. Also, it appears staff in this Bureau are particularly well trained in test measurement. Finally, it is the most public Bureau because test results are reported to the newspapers. This feature may carry with it the necessary pressure to keep the Bureau on task, and so it may not be as vulnerable as some other Bureaus to come to the assistance of Department emergencies.

Communication,dedication, and creativity:

Inter-Bureau communication and cooperation, when it exists, was cited as a positive time saver. When Chapter 2 was instituted in 1982, Chapter 1 staff assisted the new Chapter 2 staff in learning how to conduct the kind of evaluation required by the Federal Government.

Dedication to doing a good job was purported essential to timely report of evaluation findings. When Citywide Testing results are due each year, staff stay many hours overtime to process results.

Creativity by some Bureaus to report evaluation findings through vehicles other than written final reports, was said to aid in timely communication of information. Summative reports were late in almost all Bureaus, but many interviewed stated that program managers were usually informed verbally of the evaluation.

From the above it may be concluded that staff try to "shore up" lack of timeliness with approaches that serve to diminish the effect of late written reports. Indeed, in almost all Bureaus, verbal reports were stated as being the chief mode of keeping program managers informed. However, while verbal reporting was one way of communicating findings, it appears not to be completely satisfactory. It was stated that verbal reports were usually informal and it was difficult to trace how or if the information was used.

Recommendations

Staff, when interviewed, were explicitly asked to recommend approaches that would reduce the impact of bottlenecks. Table 4 includes recommendations from each Bureau. While each staff works in the context of a particular Bureau, recommendations common across many Bureaus were offered:

-Clarify the Department's direction;

-Formalize Department procedures;

-Reduce "emergencies" that pull staff off their work;

-Have weekly meetings between Bureau administrators and the Department Director;

-Develop a Department schedule that is regularly updated in the weekly staff meetings;

-Require formal communication between Program Bureaus and Service Bureaus;

-Train those staff that have difficulty with scheduling and planning;

-Hire competent staff trained in research methods;

-Encourage staff to become more skilled in evaluation

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methods;

-Allow and then encourage staff to become more involved in the profession through research, publication, and paper presentations;

-Consider sampling in some Program Bureaus that now collect complete data on all students who participate in programs;

-Organize a clearinghouse for all instruments used in evaluations to consolidate and therefore, reduce redundancy of instrumentation;

-Coordinate all data collection among relevant Bureaus so data, once collected, can form a common data base pool for all Department evaluations;

-Consider redefining the production aspect of evaluation--one suggestion was to hire a writer/editor; another asked for special staff to produce the reports in final form.

Policy Implications

Based on the findings from this study, it would appear that timeliness as a prerequisite factor in evaluation utilization deserves greater attention. Probing timeliness has revealed that evaluation reports are late. Furthermore, seeking why evaluation reports are late has exposed a key policy issue concerning the nature of program evaluation in large school districts.

The overarching concern of Bureau staff interviewed was an uneasiness over the goals of the Department. These findings suggest that the operation

of Research and Evaluation in a large school district reveals complex dimensions of ambiguity. Furthermore, how individuals view their role in this setting is critical to their perception of ambiguity. Since unclear Department goals were mentioned by the majority of those interviewed, it would appear that the standard operating procedures within the Department were confusing and at odds with the way in which many wished to conduct their work.

The data suggest that vulnerability to external influences makes long or short term planning superfluous. Routine Department emergencies diminish the importance of the designated work of the evaluator. Lack or uneveness of dissemination suggests that there may be no critical reason to produce quality or timely written reports. Similarly, confusion over the report review procedures suggest to evaluators that dissemination may never occur. Finally, the non-allowance or at least lack of encouragement for researchers to conduct scholarly studies seems to mitigate against the sense of professionalism a number of staff were calling for.

On the other hand, the data were not all bleak and the constructive suggestions offered by Department staff have implications for practice. Despite the reality that funders mandate evaluations and thus dictate the evaluation questions, it seems reasonable that scholarly research could be conducted within mandated evaluation studies. Opening up avenues for research would require a shift in attitude on the part of the Department Director wherein political concerns become concerns of educating others in the school system about the world of research. Certainly there are Departments of Research and Evaluation also not autonomous from their central administrations

where research is conducted and then presented to the larger research community.

Secondly, the uneveness in planning could be altered by opening up avenues of communication. Meetings in which each Bureau routinely informs other Bureaus of its' plans would go far to reduce surprises. Skill in making realistic schedules was particularly evident in those staff formally trained in research. Hiring only trained staff would professionalize this Department. Although recent history has seen large numbers of staff hired for reasons other than research expertise, this pattern need not predict similar practice in the future. This, of course, brings to the fore a serious look into the political nature of hiring, an acknowledged problem in this school district.

Third, creativity in evaluation research has been recommended (Patton, 1981) and a need for it is borne out in the findings from this investigation. Seeking out alternative procedures for structuring and conducting evaluations, accompanied by a tighter organization of data collection through creation of data bases and training in sampling techniques for those untrained, would likely reduce duplication of effort and save time.

Finally, it would seem appropriate that open acknowledgement of the disparate goals within this Department would go far to help individuals come to terms with ambiguity. The political environment and the need to at once respond and plan, needs to be made understandable. While conditions in this Department are far from ideal, it seems logical that recognition of these conditions could provide individuals with a way to define meaningful roles.

In sum, the implications for evaluation practice suggest that this Department could re-establish its goals while continuing to operate as an attached arm of the school district. Required would be for the Department to take advantage of the "loosely coupled" (Weick, 1976) nature of the larger organization in which levels of autonomy can be exercised. Goals may be complex, reflecting various constituencies, but their carefully planned and acknowledged priority within the Department, could dramatically reduce the level of ambiguity perceived by individual evaluators.

Table 1: Department Organi

Program Bureaus	Funding Source	Number of Staff	
		Full Time	Consultants
Chapter 1	Fed. Gov't	12	3
Chapter 2	Fed. Gov't	2	8
Equal Oppty.	Fed. Gov't	3	8
Special Education	Fed. Gov't State. of Ill.	3	1
Billingual	Fed. Gov't State of Ill.	4	3
City Wide	School District	2	3
Special Projects	School District Fed. Gov't Prival Funding	1	3
Service Bureaus			
Technical Services	Fed. Gov't	6	13
Scanner Operations	Fed. Gov't	1	5-15
Production Services	Fed. Gov't	9	3

Number of Projects	Population Served	
	Number Schools	Number Students
1	250	50,000
11	590	250,000
7	351	350,000
15	550	43,000
9	350	94,000
10	594 (approx.)	424,553
8	460 (range varies)	370,000
All Bureaus	---	---
All Bureaus	---	---
All Bureaus	---	---

Table 2. Bureau Staff Reponses to Secondary Questions

Program Bureaus	Written Design	Written Schedule	Specified Tasks
Chapter 1	YES (Proposal Fiscal 1984, Guide to Chapter 1 Evaluations Fiscal, 1984; Action Plan)	YES (Evaluation events by month)	YES General tasks (by job title)
Chapter 2	YES (Task analysis chart; guidelines, Action plan)	YES (Evaluation Tasks by month)	YES (General tasks by job title
Equal Opportunity	YES (Design Nov. 1983; Design Feb. 1984 Scope of EEO Eval. Effort 1981-84; Section N component title-evaluation)	YES (But, only generally specified)	YES (General tasks by job title)
Special Education	YES (General design; Analysis plan; Task analysis schedule; Task and responsibility outline)	YES	YES (General tasks)
Bilingual	YES (Action plan)	YES (General plans)	YES (General tasks)
City Wide Testing	YES (Action plan)	YES (Testing events by date)	YES (General tasks by staff person
Special Projects	YES (Action plan)	YES (Evaluation event by date for those evaluation; Bureau knows in advance)	YES (General tasks listed for those evaluations bureau knows about in advance)
Special Services			
Technical Services	NO (None was available strict schedules are deliberately avoided so as to stay flexible)	NO	NO
Scanner Operations	YES (Action plan)	YES (Anticipated tasks)	YES (General tasks by staff person)
Production Services	NO	NO Bureau is at "beck and call"of other bureaus	NO

Table 3: Bottlenecks: Sources of Time Delays

	External Influences	Department Emergencies	Dissemination	Internal Review Process	Dept. has Ambiquous Direction	Bureau Specific Delays
Chapter 1	X	Equal oppty. Site visitation; Lunchroom study; Other	X	X	X	Data need editing; Data analysis is dependent on Citywide testings completion
Chapter 2	X	Equal oppty Site visitation; Others	X	X	X	
Equal Opportunity	X		X	X	Design was drastically altered upon return of Dept. Director	Instrumentation includes 13 different instruments Scope of program increased
Special Education	X	Special Committee meetings	X		Return of Director, Lack of coordination within bureau	Careless key-punching
Bilingual	X	Equal oppty. Site visitation				Bilingual must wait for Citywide Test analysis; Massive workload.
City Wide Testing	X	Equal Oppty. A site visitation. Spring TAP; ITBS retest				Data need editing
Special Projects	X	Most emergencies come through this bureau first	X	From vantage point of reviewer, note quality of some reports creates delay.	X	
Service Bureaus						
Technical Services		Bureau is characterized as functioning to respond to surprizes. Also Equal Oppty. site visit; Lunchroom study				Poorly designed instruments.
Scanner Operation	X				X	Major task is to "edit" data or render it scannable; Data are late.
Production Service		X		From vantage of reviewer. Quality of some reports require revision and therefore delay		Bureau operates on a "crisis" basis.

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Table 4: Time Saving Factors and Recommendations

Program Bureaus	Positive Features That Save Time	Suggestions & Recommendations from Research and Evaluation Staff
Ch 1	- Ch 1 is oldest mandated evaluation	- One form for student information to include all data needs for Department; Begin with City testing forms to act as master data source - Encourage staff to communicate findings to larger research community
Ch 2	- Ongoing rapport with program administrators and managers Ch 1 helped orient Ch 2 staff	- "Work stoppages" should be greatly reduced so that the integrity of those tasks bureaus are doing are given credence
Equal Opportunity		- Better communication with program staff - Better communication with Department
Sp. Ed	- Verbal reports of evaluation to Program Directors are acceptable - Technical Expertise of some staff	- Organize the Bureau so that 3 coordinators work as a unit - Provide time as part of the job opportunity to conduct research over and above those studies manadate
Billingual	- Status reports are acceptable to state funders in lieuof "on time" summative reports	- Hire additional staff to carry out massive work load - Hire a writer-editor for report production
Citywide Testing	- Bureau existed as a testing unit for the schools long before Research and Evaluation was instituted, therefore it has had time and practice to standarize how it operates	
Special Projects	- Ongoing communication with the Department Director, program managers	- Formalize "Internal Review" procedures
Service Bureaus		
Technical	- Staff routinely "overtime" at peak work periods - High level of expertise of staff - Bureau tries to respond to crises	- Bureaushould know in advance all major tasks other bureaus will require - All forms to be keypunched should be reviewed before they are sent to schools - Sampling is a legitimate alternative to massive data collection in some bureaus - Weekly meetings (without fail) of bureau heads with the director
Scanner	- High Level expertise of staff	- Provide another "high speed" scanner - Staff in Departmenc (as well as school system) need to know how to better plan projects. Those tasks that lead up to timely finished product must be planned in advance
Production Services	- Bureau tries to respond to crises	- Bureau should know in advance all major tasks other bureaus will require - Formalize "Internal Review" procedure

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